



Children in Child Welfare: Comprehensive Functional Family Assessment Practice Bulletin April 2008



A Comprehensive Functional Assessment is a dynamic and ongoing process of gathering, analyzing, comparing, and synthesizing the information from various sources to come to an understanding of family strengths and needs relating to child's safety, permanency and well-being. A good assessment has a direct effect on better outcomes for children. This assessment provides a shared understanding with the family of the child and family's situation and identifies the change necessary for safe case closure.

The family assessment is the foundation of good case planning. Assessing includes understanding the family functioning and family systems, the functional strengths and needs within the domains, and cycle of need including the underlying need. Without identifying correctly the underlying needs and relationship issues, our efforts to help the family cannot be successful. Things to know and understand about the family include:

- ☐ Safety of the child
- ☐ Strengths, needs, resources of the family and their support systems
- ☐ Underlying family issues: substance abuse, domestic violence, housing, health, employment and cultural concerns
- ☐ Needs of the child and family members: health, mental health, developmental needs
- ☐ Recurrent patterns of behaviors and response to stressors
- ☐ Past and current support services and the effectiveness of those services
- ☐ Caregiver's ability to care for the child and make changes, and
- ☐ Family relationships and interactions.

DHS Case reading data indicates that 85% of 626 children's reviewed between August 2007 and October 2007 were adequately assessed and had their needs met through services provided.

Safety of the child must be assessed using the safety constructs: **Threats of Maltreatment** are situations, behaviors, emotions, motives, perceptions, or capacities which can produce child maltreatment. **Vulnerability** is the degree to which a child cannot on her own; avoid, negate, minimize/modify the impact of present or impending danger. **Protective capacities** are family strengths or resources that reduce, control and or prevent threats of maltreatment. Lack of these strengths and resources (deficiencies) should be noted also.

[see Safety and Risk of Harm Practice Bulletin February 2008]

Five Domains: The five areas or domains, which must be assessed include:

Child Well-Being:

- ☐ Child(ren's) current mental health status and prevalence of mental health history
- ☐ Child(ren's) current behavioral functioning and any historical behavioral concerns
- ☐ The current emotional well-being of the child(ren), such as their affect and emotional state
- ☐ How the child is current performing in school, such as: attendance, grades, homework completion, behavior concerns in the classroom or discipline issues at school
- ☐ Description of the child's relationship with his/her parent(s) or caregiver(s)
- ☐ Description of the child's relationship with sibling(s)
- ☐ Description of the child's relationship with his/her peer group
- ☐ A sense of the child's motivation/cooperation to maintain the family



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Parental Capabilities:

- ☐ An understanding of the how the parent or caregiver provides supervision for the child(ren)
- ☐ What are the parent or caregiver's disciplinary practices for the child
- ☐ The developmental or enrichment opportunities for the child
- ☐ An understanding of the parent/caregiver's physical health, including chronic or debilitating conditions that may impede caregiving
- ☐ An understanding of the parent or caregiver's mental or emotional health, including an understanding of any current or historical conditions and how this may impede caregiving
- ☐ An understanding of the parent or caregiver's abuse of alcohol or drugs and how it may impede caregiving.

Family Safety:

- ☐ Absence/presence of physical abuse of the child(ren), or any history of such for the child and family
- ☐ Absence/presence of sexual abuse of the child(ren) or any history of such for the child and family
- ☐ Absence/presence of emotional abuse of the child(ren) or any history of such for the child and family
- ☐ Absence/presence of neglect of child(ren) or any history of such for the child and family
- ☐ Absence/presence of domestic violence between parents/caregivers or any history of such for the family

Family Interaction:

- ☐ What sense of bonding is there between the child(ren) and parents or caregivers?
- ☐ What are the parental expectations of the child(ren) and are they reasonable expectations?
- ☐ What are the mutual supports within the family?
- ☐ What is the relationship like between the parents/caregivers?

Home Environment:

- ☐ What is the stability and history of the current housing situation? Likewise, what is the placement/disruption history of the child?
- ☐ Are there any safety concerns within the community? What is the degree of visibility of the children?
- ☐ What is the current habitability of housing and are there any age-appropriate safety concerns in the home?

- ☐ What is the income and employment situation for the parents or caregivers?
- ☐ What are the financial management skills of the caregivers?
- ☐ The degree to which food and nutritional needs of the children are met.
- ☐ The degree to which personal hygiene needs are met for the children.
- ☐ Access to transportation for the family.
- ☐ A sense of the child(ren)'s learning environment within the home.

Expectations: DHS caseworkers are required to make concerted efforts to assess the needs of **children, parents, and foster parents**. The services necessary to achieve case goals and adequately address the issues relevant to the involvement with the family must be provided. The adequacy of an assessment is based on documenting an in-depth understanding of the needs of the child, the family, and foster parents. Assessments include:

- ☐ A formal or informal initial comprehensive assessment of the children's needs, parents needs and foster parent needs, or
- ☐ An ongoing assessment to provide updated information regarding the children's needs for case planning purposes.

Assessment of the parents' needs refers to a determination of what parents need to provide appropriate care and supervision to ensure the safety and well-being of their children.

Assessments of needs may take different forms. For example, needs may be assessed through a formal evaluation conducted by another agency or by a contracted provider or through a more informal case planning process involving intensive interviews with the child, family, service providers, etc.

If the case is an in-home case, assessment of the service needs must be made for all children in the family, even if only one child was the subject of the maltreatment report.

For any child in foster care age 16 or older, , there must be an assessment of the child's service needs relevant to independent living and transition to adulthood.



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Research: We are usually involved with families and children in times of great stress and disequilibrium. In order to be successful with a case, the social worker must be carefully attuned to the person's definition of their needs, for to move forward without addressing areas that they define as important risks losing the family's motivation. The needs must address the areas that the family believes must be addressed. The social worker must have the interviewing skills, knowledge of practice, and critical thinking skills to help the family and children to reframe their issues and translate complaints and problems into needs and wants. The strengths-based family assessment is planned to achieve these goals. In completing a strengths-based assessment, Cowger and Snively (2002) suggest that there are guidelines to help the family and social workers identify meaningful and functional strengths.

- Give preeminence to the children and families' understanding of the facts. The children and family's definition of the situation and the meaning that they give the situation are the central focus for the assessment.
- Believe the children and family to the degree possible. Fundamental to the strengths-based model is that the clients are ultimately trustworthy. This is somewhat difficult to deal with in a situation where the social worker is in fact investigating allegations. However, the social worker is called upon to be fair and not to prejudge the family and to recognize their dignity and worth throughout the process. Helping the children and family to realize alternative or unexplored views of their behavior while still appreciating the family's perspective is part of this process.
- Discover what the client wants. The social worker must determine what the children and family want to have happen in relation to the current problem. This involves helping the family to articulate their needs and wants and to determine what the family perceives to be successful resolution of the case.
- Move the assessment toward personal and environmental strengths. Focusing on the strengths can help families creatively negotiate obstacles.
- Make the assessments of strengths multidimensional. The strengths-based assessment requires that the social worker believe that there are strengths and

resources that can be used for resolution of the problem. The answer lies in the interpersonal skills, motivation, emotional strength, and abilities of the participants. The external strengths include family relationships, significant others, community supports and services, faith-based communities, and social services. The assessment also includes the interaction of these factors.

- Use the assessment to discover uniqueness. Every individual is unique, and the situation that surrounds him/her is unique as well. The special skills and abilities that the children and family possess and the interaction with the environment creates opportunity to formulate creative responses to their needs.
- Use the words as expressed by the children and family. The use of professional jargon and nomenclature is inconsistent with the approach of mutual participation with the social worker and the family. The assessment should be written in clear and easy-to-understand terms. The statement of strengths and needs should reflect the values and perspective of the children and family.
- Make assessments a joint activity between the social worker and children and family. Social workers can establish a strong working relationship with children and families by stressing the importance of their understandings and desires. The worker's role is to inquire and listen and assist the children and family in discovering, clarifying, and articulating their viewpoints. The children and family must feel ownership of the process and the product and can do so only if the assessment is open and shared.
- Reach mutual agreement on the assessment. The social worker should not have secret assessments or case plans. All the assessments that are written should be shared with the family. Because assessments form the basis for the goals and interventions, having privately held assessments and case plan can leave the family feeling that they are left out and subject to manipulation.

Research has shown that following a formal protocol or checklist of factors can help to increase the consistency of decisions and produce improved decision making results by child protection workers. **TOUGH PROBLEMS, TOUGH CHOICES** is available to all workers and provides a formal protocol for responding to categorical needs of families. The TPTC guidelines provide, in a structured decision tree format, a checklist



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of factors affecting abused and neglected children in specific types of cases, and alternatives for services and supports that may be provided to the child and the parents or caregivers to help remediate abuse and neglect and the factors precipitating child maltreatment. They cover the **fourteen most common situations** that a worker may encounter in working with maltreated children and their families. Each of these situations is discussed separately, followed by a decision making chart which is intended to offer a structured checklist approach to responding to a specific situation.

http://www.americanhumane.org/site/PageServer?pagename=pc_best_practice_casey_homepage

Critical thinking is the process that allows professionals and families to take wise action, meaning, making the best judgments possible in a specific circumstance. "Social work practice involves gathering information and analyzing information, but importantly it also requires that judgments and decisions be made and action taken based on the information and analysis. Critical reasoning is more than analysis, it is informed action." (Plath, English, Connors, and Beveridge, 1999).

Practice Tips:

- To complete an adequate assessment you must engage the family in a trust based relationship and shared decision-making. Until there is a degree of trust, you will not get information that will aide you in helping the family. You must demonstrate respect, genuiness, empathy, honesty, and integrity in all interactions with families and individuals; create open dialogue/ communication, develop a trust-based relationship, and engage the family in problem solving and self-determination to improve family functioning and safety of children.
- A key to success in assessing and planning service strategies is to accept the family definition of the problem, the behavioral changes that must take place, and practical solutions. Starting with the family language helps build trust and allows you to share your knowledge and expertise in a helpful way to reframe and expand their understanding.
- Just to understand the family is not enough, the information needs to be shared with the family team and other professionals involved with the family. As

we work with other professionals we should advocate for shared goals and move to one family - one plan.

- Use **Tough Problems, Tough Choices** systematically in assessing each family until the guide becomes integral to your practice.
- Use a Self-Assessment checklist to assure you are completing the most important basics of practice:
ENGAGING: How well is a trust-based working relationship being formed and maintained with the child and family as well as with other service partners involved in this case?

UNDERSTANDING: Does the family team understand the child and family situation well enough to provide change strategies and supports that are producing desired results?

1. What are the presenting problems and underlying issues requiring change? • What are the circumstances that have resulted in child welfare system involvement? Are they clearly identified and agreed upon by the family team?
2. Is the child's functional status in daily settings accurately assessed and understood in context of the family and culture?
3. Are issues related to functioning (trauma, substance abuse, mental health, developmental or physical disabilities) diagnosed and understood by the team?
4. Have threats of harm (e.g., abuse, neglect, domestic violence, health crisis, suicide) been identified? • Is a safety plan in place to prevent harm? • Are necessary capacities in place to implement it successfully?
5. Are any special needs, threats of harm, transition requirements, or needs for further assessment understood and acted on by the family team?
6. How are the basic needs (e.g. food, housing, health care, child care) of the child and family being met?
7. Are there recognizable patterns present (e.g., trauma, chronic neglect) that should be addressed?
8. How does the team recognize/respect the capacities, resources, and preferences of the child and family?
9. Are other interveners in the child's life participating in developing a "big picture"



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understanding of the case situation? • Are they part of the family team?

PLANNING: Is planning an ongoing process that reflects current understandings, drives the family change process toward meeting conditions set for case closure, and uses well-reasoned strategies?

1. What conditions have been set for case closure? Ask the question "How will we know when we are done?" • Are case closure conditions are set for: • Protective capacities in the home? • Parental behavior changes? • Sustainable family supports? • Resolution of permanency and any other legal requirements
2. How well are strategies and supports being used with the family to bring about necessary changes for meeting conditions set for case closure?

□ **Avoid these errors in assessing families:**

- ✓ **Lack of essential knowledge:** Be prepared and have all the information and knowledge of the family prior to seeing the family.
- ✓ **Taking shortcuts:** Taking shortcuts may lead to erroneous conclusions.
- ✓ **Rushing to conclusions/making assumptions:** When the family starts to tell their story, if you start to jump to conclusions or assume you know the whole story, you might miss some critical information about the family. Also, problems might not always seem what they look like on the surface.
- ✓ **Failure to spot key patterns of high diagnostic or risk management:** Listen to the whole story and see if the same issues keep coming up. Oftentimes, persistent themes emerge for a family as we gain deeper understanding.
- ✓ **Failure to identify the needs of the family:** If you do not understand what the needs of the family are (what they feel the needs are), you will not be able to identify the appropriate type of services that can be provided.
- ✓ **Failure to see the strengths of the family:** All families have strengths. When failing to identify any strengths for a family, we need to reframe our assessment.

Resources

- Cowger and Snively, (2002). Assessing client strengths: Individual, Family, and community empowerment. In D. Saleebey, *The strengths perspective in social workpractice* (3rd ed., pp. 106-123). Boston: Allyn & Bacon.
- "Comprehensive Family Assessment guidelines for Child Welfare" NRC for Family-Centered Practice and Permanency Planning.
http://www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/cb/pubs/family_assessment/index.htm
- Tough problems, tough choices: Guidelines for Needs-Based Service Planning in Child Welfare. Feilds and Winterfeld, http://www.americanhumane.org/site/PageServer?pagename=pc_best_practice_casey_homepage
- "Evaluating the outcomes of intensive critical thinking instruction for social work students," Plath, Debbie; English, Brian; Connors, Louisa; Beveridge, Alex, *Social Work Education*, Volume 18, Number 2, June 1999 , pp. 207-217(11)
- Using General Case Patterns For Advancing Frontline Practice Development in Child Welfare © Human Systems & Outcomes, Inc. • April 2005
- Alexander, P. A., & Judy, J. E. (1988, Winter). The interaction of domain-specific and strategic knowledge in academic performance. *Review of Educational Research*, 58(4), 375-404

